

Message Text

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ACTION AF-08

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FM AMEMBASSY COTONOU

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9290

INFO AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN

AMEMBASSY ACCRA

AMEMBASSY CONAKRY

AMEMBASSY DAKAR

AMEMBASSY LAGOS

AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE

AMEMBASSY LOME

AMEMBASSY MONROVIA

AMEMBASSY NIAMEY

USIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 COTONOU 0168

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR PINS DM

SUBJ: BENIN COUP ATTEMPT: WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN

SUMMARY: TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT EXIST IN COTONOU REGARDING LAST WEEK'S INVASION: THAT IT WAS A WELL-ORCHESTRATED DRAMA DESIGNED TO SOLIDIFY THE GOVERNMENT'S HAND, OR THAT IT REALLY DID HAPPEN THE WAY THE BENINESE SAY. THE FORMER MIGHT BE "TOO CLEVER," BUT MANY COINCIDENCES EXIST TO SUPPORT IT, AND THE LATTER IMPLIES IMPOTENCE ON THE PART OF THE GPRB WHEN FACED WITH A CONCERTED ATTACK. END SUMMARY

1. A WEEK HAS NOW PASSED SINCE BENIN SUFFERED ITS FIRST AIR-BORNE INVASION IN HISTORY AND ITS FOURTH MAJOR POLITICAL TEST IN THE FOUR-YEAR HISTORY OF THE KEREKOU REGIME. THE ONLY REMAINING SIGNS OF LAST WEEK'S PUTSCH ARE LITERALLY THOUSANDS
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OF BRAND-NEW AK-47'S WHICH HAVE BEEN DISTRIBUTED, AND LONG LINES OF BENINESE WAITING TO GAWK AT THE CITY'S NEW SPECTACLES: HOLES IN THE PRESIDENCY, A TON OF CAPTURED WEAPONS, AND THE SPOT WHERE ONE WHITE MERCENARY IS REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN KILLED. MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS HAVE BEEN FORTHCOMING SINCE THE ATTACK LAST SUNDAY MORNING, HOWEVER, AND THE COMMISSION OF INQUIRY IS NOT DUE TO FINISH ITS DELIBERATIONS BEFORE THE END

OF THE MONTH.

2. NO MATTER WHAT THE COMMISSION SAYS, THOUGH A VERY LARGE PART OF THE NON-BENINESE COMMUNITY IN COTONOU, AND PERHAPS EVEN QUITE A FEW BENINESE, ARE HAVING A HARD TIME EXPLAINING THE COMPLETE NONCHALANCE EXHIBITED BY THE WHITE INVADERS EXCEPT BY SAYING THAT THE ENTIRE INVASION WAS A "PEICE DU THEATRE." EVERY EYEWITNESS WE HAVE TALKED WITH SAID THE INVADERS WALKED FROM THE AIRPORT WITH GUNS SLUNG OVER THEIR SHOULDERS, LOOKING NEITHER RIGHT NOR LEFT, AND CERTAINLY SHOWING NO SIGNS OF ALERTNESS TO COUNTERATTACK. WE CAN FIND ABSOLUTELY NO ONE WHO SAW A BATTLE OF ANY KIND WITH ONE SIDE SHOOTING AT THE OTHER. INSTEAD, ONLOOKERS FROM BOTH NEAR AND FAR DESCRIBE ALL SHOOTING BY THE INVADERS AS BEING EITHER INTO THE AIR OR AT APPARENTLY EMPTY BUILDINGS--INCLUDING THE PRESIDENCY, WHICH AS ANY PLOTTER OUGHT TO KNOW IS USED BY THE PRESIDENT ONLY FOR CEREMONIAL OCCASIONS. CRO DAVIS, AN EYEWITNESS FROM THE NEARBY CROIX DU SUD HOTEL BEFORE HE WAS TAKEN INTO DETENTION BY THE GPRB, AND A VETERAN OF THE VIETNAM COMBAT COURSE AND THREE YEARS IN VIETNAM, EVEN WENT SO FAR AS TO SAY MANY IF NOT MOST OF THE INVADERS WERE FIRING BLANKS, AND MANY OF THE EXPLOSIONS WERE SIMULATORS OF THE TYPE USED IN TRAINING. HE PERSONALLY SAW TWO WHITE SOLDIERS CONTINUE TO WALK RIGHT TOWARD SUCH AN EXPLOSION NOT TEN FEET FROM THE CLOSEST, SHOWING NO SIGNS OF FEAR OR ILL EFFECTS. DAVIS WAS SO CONVINCED IT WAS WAR GAMES, IN FACT, THAT HE ONLY WATCHED A FEW MINUTES BEFORE RETURNING TO A BOOK HE HAD BEEN READING BEFORE THE SHOOTING STARTED.

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3. THE ONE AND FUTURE PAO, NOW ACTING CHARGE, PERSONALLY MONITORED THE RADIO FROM 7:15, 20 MINUTES BEFORE FIRST MENTION OF THE ATTACK WAS EVEN MADE ON THE AIR, AND DISTINCTLY HEARD THE FIRST CALL FOR ALL MILITANTS TO GO TO THE AIRPORT TO DESTROY THE PLANES AND CRATER THE RUNWAY. THE ORDER WAS COUNTERMANDED WITHIN 20 MINUTES WITH THE ORDER TO BUILD BLOCKADES ON ROADS AND DAMS ON THE LAGOON--IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT THE INVADERS WERE NOT COMING IN BY WATER OR LAND WHEN THE ORDERS WERE GIVEN.

4. AND THEN AS THE INVADERS WERE RETREATING TO THE AIRPORT, NO FEWER THAN THREE DIFFERENT OBSERVERS HAVE TOLD US THEY SAUNTERED ALONG, AGAIN LOOKING NEITHER RIGHT NOR LEFT, UNHURRIED AND UNPURSUED BY COUNTERATTACKERS. SEVERAL WITNESSES SAID IT WAS AT LEAST TEN MINUTES AFTER THE INVADERS LEFT THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD BEFORE THE FIRST GPRB MILITARY SHOWED UP, SLOWLY, CAUTIOUSLY, AND STARTED TO SHOOT UP MORE EMPTY BUILDINGS, INCLUDING THE AMERICAN AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE.

5. THREE DAYS AFTER THE EVENT WE WERE ABLE TO MOVE AROUND TOWN TO SEE THE DAMAGE. THE PRESIDENCY HAD THREE OR FOUR BAZOOKA HITS, BUT NONE OF THEM AGAINST THE RATHER FLIMSY GATES, WHICH WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE OPENED IMMEDIATELY HAD THEY BEEN HIT. THE PRESIDENCY ALSO RECEIVED TWO MORTOR ROUNDS: BOTH ON THE ROOF ABOVE THE (UNUSED) PRESIDENT'S BEDROOM, THE ONE NO MORE THAN EIGHT FEET FROM THE OTHER, AND WITH NO SIGNS OF RANGING SHOTS HAVING IMPACTED ELSEWHERE AS THE INVADERS WERE ZEROING IN. THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR, WHICH CONTROLS THE ALL-POWERFUL STATE POLICE, AND WHICH IS RIGHT ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE PRESIDENCY, DID NOT TAKE A SINGLE HIT, EVEN RIFLE BULLETS, FROM THE LOOK OF IT. FURTHER TOWARD THE AIRPORT, THE BRAND NEW (BUT UNUSED SINCE IT WAS OPENED TWO YEARS AGO) TELEVISION STATION TOOK ONE BAZOOKA HIT, BUT THE BRAND NEW RADIO STATION, BROADCASTING AT THE TIME AND COMPLETELY UNWALLED ON THE SIDE FROM WHICH THE INVADERS CAME, ALSO CAME THROUGH UNSCATHED. NOT A SINGLE MORTOR ROUND FELL ON CAMP GUEZO, THE

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MILITARY CAMPT THE INVADERS WOULD HAVE PASSED WITHIN ONE BLOCK ON THEIR WAY TO THE PRESIDENCY, NOR DID THEY TRY TO TAKE THE AMMUNITION STORAGE FACILITY JUST OUTSIDE THE CAMP WALLS AND USUALLY GUARDED BY ONLY ONE OR TWO SENTRIES. ONE GRASS SHACK (UNOCCUPIED) BELONGING TO THE HOTEL CROIX DU SUD WAS BURNED TO THE GROUND, AND A FIRE BROKE OUT IN THE NEIGHBORING CONGRESS HALL, DAMAGING PERHAPS ONE OR TWO ROOMS.

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6. WOUNDS WE HAVE HEARD OF WERE INFLICTED DURING THE HEAVIEST SHOOTING, WHICH TOOK PLACE AROUND NOON WHEN THE GPRB MOUNTED ITS GREATEST COUNTEROFFENSIVE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD BORDERING THE EASTERN EDGE OF THE AIRPORT. THE AIRPLANE HAD LEFT ONE HOUR EARLIER, BUT THE ATTACK WAS WITNESSED BY A VERY LARGE PART OF THE FOREIGN COMMUNITY IN COTONOU, THREE-QUARTERS OF WHOM LIVE THERE.

7. FINALLY, EVEN THOUGH THERE ARE RUMORS OF KILLED AND CAPTURED WHITE MERCENARIES MOST ARE TRACEABLE ULTIMATELY TO THE SAME STORY: ONE WHITE KIA, ONE POW IDENTIFIED AS GUINEAN. EVEN THE "FOREIGN CURRENCY" MENTIONED IN SOME REPORTS WAS PICTURED IN EHUZU AND IS READILY IDENTIFIABLE AS THE CFA FRANC, USED IN SIX WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES INCLUDING BENIN.

8. THE NATURAL QUESTION IS WHY. INITIALLY OBSERVABLE RESULTS
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HAVE BEEN THE ARMING OF THE MILITARY WITH NEW AK-47'S, THE IMPOSITION OF STRICT SECURITY MEASURES AND SUSPICION OF ALL FOREIGNERS, AND THE EMERGENCE OF KEREKOU AS THE UNCHALLENGED LEADER. WHEREAS INTERIOR/INFORMATION MINISTER AZONHIHO MIGHT NORMALLY HAVE BEEN EXPECTED TO ADDRESS THE PEOPLE DOZENS OF TIMES SINCE LAST SUNDAY, QUITE A FEW BENINESE HAVE MENTIONED TO US THEIR SURPRISE THAT HE HAS NOT MADE A SINGLE PUBLIC PRONOUNCEMENT. THEN, OF COURSE, THERE WAS THE OFFICIAL VISIT OF THE NORTH KOREAN VICE PREMEIR, AND TOO MANY ACCOUNTS TO DISCOUNT OF KOREANS WANDERING THE STREETS IN THE THICK OF THE FIGHTING, TAKING PICTURES OF THE ENTIRE EPISODE. FINALLY, ONE NEED ONLY LOOK OUT THE EMBASSY WINDOW AT THE LINES OF LITERALLY THOUSANDS OF BENINESE SEEKING A CHANCE TO SEE THE CAPTURED GUNS TO REALIZE THAT FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE PAST THREE MONTHS THE PEOPLE ARE NO LONGER TALKING ABOUT BAD CROPS, THE HIGH COST OF ESSENTIAL FOODSTUFFS, AND REPRESSIVE GOVERNMENT STRICTURES ON MARKETING. AND IF IT IS TRUE THAT THIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ANTICIPATING JUST SUCH COUP EFFORT, AS SOME REPORTS HAVE IT, THEN SUNDAY'S ACTIVITIES COULD WELL BE SEEN AS A PREEMPTIVE SHOW ON THE PART OF THE GPRB, TO PREVENT THE REAL THING LATER.

9. SUCH REVOLUTIONARY THEATER IS EXPENSIVE, THOUGH, AND THE

GPRB WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY NEED TO FIND SOMEONE TO BANKROLL

IT. IF THE PLANE WAS INDEED AN ILYUSHIN -18, AS TWO KNOWLEDGE-
ABLE EYEWITNESSES REPORT IT, (THE PRESIDENT IN HIS SPEECH TO
THE NATION CALLED IT " A DC-7, CURIOUSLY ENOUGH EQUIPPED WITH
TURBOPROPS***) THEN A CASE COULD DEFINATELY BE MADE FOR SUPPORT
FROM TWO FO BENIN'S MTST LOYAL SUPPORTERS: ALGERIA OR GUINEA.
AND A FLIGHT SUCH AS SUNDAY'S COULD CERTAINLY BE MADE FROM
EITHER OF THOSE COUNTRIES IN SUCH A PLANE WITHOUT REFUELING,
WHICH WOULD EXPLAIN THE LACK OF REPORTED STOPS IN NEIGHBOR-
ING COUNTRIES.

10. IT IS POSSIBLE TOO TO MAKE A CASE FOR A REAL COUP ATTEMPT,
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SUPPORTED BY FTRMER PRESIDENT EMILE ZINSOU AND FORMER AMBASSA-
DOR TO BELGIUM GRATIEN POGON, LEADER OF THE FRONT POUR LA
LIBERATION ET LA REHABILITATION DE DAHOMEY(FLERD). THIS
SCENARIO HAS IT THAT THE INVADING FORCE EXPECTED TO BE MET
BY A FIFTH COLUMN, BUT THAT THE GPRB HAD INFILTRATED THE PLOTTERS
AND PICKED UP THE INSIDERS THE NIGHT BEFORE THE INVASION,
SO THE INVADERS CAME INTO TOWN AND SHOT IT UP A LITTLE TO EARN
THEIR PAY, THEN LEFT. A VARIATION ON THIS THEME HAS IT THAT THE
RAID WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A SHOW OF FORCE BY THE ZINSOU/POGON
PLOTTERS, WHO WANTED TO DEMONSTRATE THE INABILITY OF THE
KEREKOU REGIME TO DEFEND ITSELF FROM OUTSIDE ATTACK. IF
THIS LATTER THEORY TURNS OUT TO BE THE CORRECT ONE, THE PLOTTERS
MIGHT HAVE LOST MORE THAN THEY GAINED: THE NEW AUTOMATIC
WEAPONS HAVE NOW BEEN DISTRIBUTED, ANTI-IMPERIALIST AND ANTI-
WESTERN PASSIONS HAVE BEEN INFLAMED, AND NEIGHBORING "PROGRES-
SIVE" COUNTRIES HAVE BEEN OUTRAGED AT THIS VIOLATION OF A
SMALL AFRICAN COUNTRY'S TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY.

11. BUT UNTIL "SOLDIER OF FORTUNE" MAGAZINE CARRIES AN ARTICLE
THAT SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT,THE PHONY WAR SCENARIO WILL BE
THE PREFERRED VERSION FOR THE COTONOU RUMOR MILL.
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